



Toulouse Area

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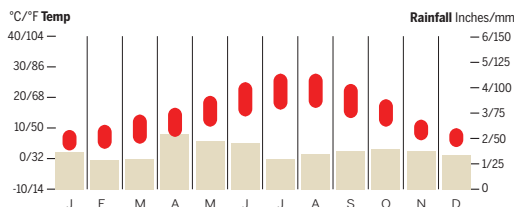
Why Go?

Rich food, good wine and slow living: that's what this sun-baked corner of southwest France is all about. Traditionally part of the Languedoc, the redbrick city of Toulouse and the surrounding area has been out on its own since World War II, but scratch beneath the surface and you'll discover the same old southern passions.

The capital city makes the perfect introduction: with its buzzy markets, stately architecture, crackling culture and renowned rugby team, Toulouse is one of France's liveliest provincial cities. Beyond the fringes of La Ville Rose lies a landscape dotted with sturdy *bastides* (fortified towns), soaring cathedrals and traditional country markets, not to mention the historic province of Gascony, famous for its foie gras, fattened ducks and fiery Armagnac. And through it all runs the languid course of the Canal du Midi, the undisputed queen of French canals. Take things slow: life in this corner of France is all about the living.

When to Go

Toulouse



February Toulouse celebrates its symbolic flower at the fragrant Festival de la Violette.

March Join the crowds for Albi's annual street carnival.

August Montauban commemorates its martial past at the Legende des Quatre-Cents Coups.

Toulouse

POP 446,200

Elegantly situated at the confluence of the Canal du Midi and the River Garonne, the vibrant southern city of Toulouse is often known as La Ville Rose, a reference to the distinctive hot-pink stone used to build many of its buildings. Busy, buzzy and bustling with students, this grand old riverside dame has a history stretching back over 2000 years, but it's a city with its eyes on the future: it's been an important hub for the aerospace industry since the 1930s, but more recently Toulouse has positioned itself at the forefront of France's drive towards cleaner, greener energies. It's also a city that lives or dies by the fortunes of its rugby team, Stade Toulousain (often known to locals simply as '*les rouges et noirs*', the reds and blacks), who scooped top honours in the European Cup in 2010.

With a thriving café and cultural scene, a wealth of impressive *hôtels particulier* (private mansions) and an enormously atmospheric old quarter, France's fourth-largest city is a place where you'll definitely want to linger.



Sights

Toulouse's main square is **place du Capitole**, where Toulousiens turn out en masse on sunny evenings to sip a coffee or an early aperitif. On the square's eastern side is the 128m-long facade of the **Capitole**, the city hall, built in the 1750s. Inside is the **Théâtre du Capitole**, one of France's most prestigious opera venues, and the over-the-top, late-19th-century **Salle des Illustres** (Hall of the Illustrious). Just east of the square is **place Wilson**, another leafy square ringed with cafés and bistros.

To the south of the square is Toulouse's **Vieux Quartier**, a tight tangle of meandering lanes and leafy squares brimming with enticing cafés, shops and eateries.

Basilique St-Sernin

CHURCH

(place St-Sernin; ☉8.30am-noon & 2-6pm) The magnificent octagonal tower and spire of Toulouse's famous red-brick basilica pop up above the rooftops from many angles round the city. This is France's largest and best-preserved example of Romanesque architecture, and it's certainly a sight to behold; inside, the soaring nave and delicate pillars lead towards the ornate tomb of St-Sernin himself, sheltered beneath a sumptuous canopy. The basilica was once an important

stop of the Chemin de St-Jacques pilgrimage route.

Cité de l'Espace

AEROSPACE MUSEUM

(www.cite-espace.com/en; av Jean Gonord; adult/child €22/15.50; ☉9.30am-7pm, closed Jan) Toulouse's aeronautical history dates back to WWI, and the city was later a hub for pioneering early mail flights to northwest Africa and South America (France's beloved pilot-poet Antoine de St-Exupéry, author of *Le Petit Prince*, often overnighted in Toulouse between sorties). After WWII, Toulouse became the centre for France's burgeoning aerospace industry, and has developed many important aircraft over the last half century including Concorde and the 555-seat Airbus A380, as well as components for many of the world's leading space programs.

On Toulouse's eastern outskirts, the Cité de l'Espace explores the city's interstellar credentials with a wealth of hands-on exhibits, from space-shuttle simulators and 3D theatres to full-scale replicas of the Mir Space Station and a 53m-high Ariane 5 space rocket. Guided **tours** (adult/child €4.90/3.90) in French are offered throughout the day, or you can pick up a multilingual **audioguide** (€4.90/3.90). The best way to get there is by bus; take bus 15 from allée Jean Jaurès to the last stop, from where it's a 500m walk.

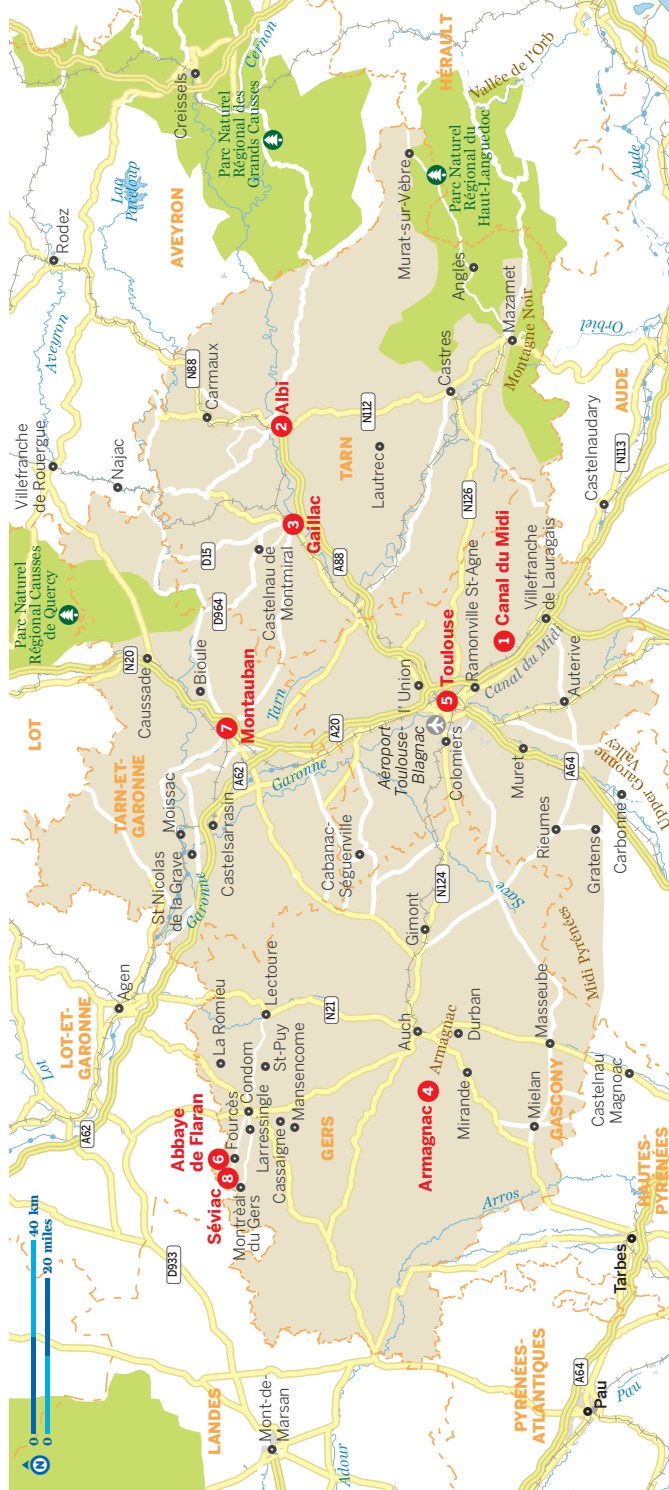
Ensemble Conventuel des Jacobins

MUSEUM

(www.jacobins.mairie-toulouse.fr; rue Lakanal; ☉9am-7pm) The church is the centrepiece of this magnificent ensemble. Indeed the extraordinary Gothic structure of **Église des Jacobins**, flooded by day in multicoloured natural light from the huge stained-glass windows, practically defies gravity. Along the nave, a single row of seven 22m-high columns spread their fanned vaulting like palm trees.

Used as artillery barracks in the 19th century, this is the mother church of the order of Dominican friars. Construction began soon after St Dominic founded the order in 1215, and it took 170 years to complete, including the 45m-tall belfry. Interred beneath the altar are the remains of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), early head of the Dominican order.

Equally arresting is a stroll around the **Cloître des Jacobins** (admission €3), a meditative cloister with boxed-hedge garden and stage for piano recitals in September.



Toulouse Area Highlights

- 1 Putter down the historic **Canal du Midi** (boxed text p690)
- 2 Admire the posters, prints and portraits at the **Toulouse-Lautrec Museum** (p693) in Albi
- 3 Pick up some local vintages around the wine town of **Gaillac** (boxed text p697)
- 4 Sample some **Armagnac** (p701) straight from the barrel
- 5 Shop for supplies at Toulouse's bustling covered **markets** (p691)
- 6 Get spiritual at the **Abbaye de Flaran** (p703), one of southwest France's loveliest Cistercian abbeys
- 7 Visit the typical *bastide* town of **Montauban** (p696)
- 8 Marvel at the mosaics at the **Roman villa** (p703) of Séviac near Montréal du Gers



Toulouse

☉ Top Sights

Basilique St-Sernin	C2
Ensemble Conventuel des Jacobins	C4
Musée des Augustins	E5

☉ Sights

1 Boat Trips	B5
2 Capitole	D3
3 Cathédrale St-Étienne	F6
4 Château d'Eau	A6
5 Église Notre Dame du Taur	D3
6 Fondation Bemberg	C5
Hôtel d'Assézat	(see 6)
7 Musée Paul Dupuy	E7
8 Musée St-Raymond	C2
Théâtre du Capitole	(see 2)

🛏 Sleeping

9 Hôtel Albert 1er	D3
10 Hôtel des Beaux Arts	C6
11 Hôtel La Chartreuse	G1
12 Hôtel St-Claire	G3
13 Hôtel St-Sernin	D1
14 Le Clos des Potiers	G7
15 Les Bains Douches	H6
16 Les Loges de St-Sernin	D1

🍴 Eating

17 7 Place St-Sernin	C1
18 Anges et Démon	E7
19 Au Coin de la Rue	A4

20 Au Jardin des Thés	E4
21 Boulangerie St-Georges	E5
22 Chez Navarre	E7
23 Emile	E5
24 Faim des Haricots	D5
25 Le Fournil de Victor Hugo	E3
26 Le Paradis Gourmand	D5
27 Les Halles Victor Hugo	E3
28 Marché des Carmes	D7
29 Papillotes et Berlingots	D6
30 Xavier	E2

☕ Drinking

31 Au Père Louis	D5
32 Bodega Bodega	F3
33 Café des Artistes	B5
34 La Couleur de la Culotte	A4
35 La Maison	F3
36 La Terrasse aux Violettes	G1
37 L'Autre Salon de Thé	D5
38 Le Bar Basque	A4

🎬 Entertainment

39 Cinéma ABC	D1
40 Cinémathèque de Toulouse	C2
41 Fnac	F3
42 Le Saint des Seins	A4
43 Rest'ô Jazz	H3

🛍 Shopping

44 Book Market	F6
45 Flea Market	C1

Art exhibitions fill the 14th-century refectory; **Les Jacobins** (☎05 61 22 23 82; 69 rue Pargaminières; admission free; ☉9am-7pm).

Musée des Augustins

ART MUSEUM

(www.augustins.org; 21 rue de Metz; adult/child €3/free; temporary exhibitions €6/free; ☉10am-6pm Thu-Tue, 10am-9pm Wed) Toulouse's fabulous fine arts museum spans the centuries from the Roman era right through to the early 20th century. The highlights are the French rooms, with Delacroix, Ingres and Courbet representing the 18th and 19th centuries, and a few choice works by Toulouse-Lautrec and Monet among the standouts from the 20th-century collection. It's in a former Augustinian monastery, and its two 14th-century cloister gardens are postcard-pretty.

Les Abattoirs

GALLERY

(www.lesabattoirs.org; 76 allée Charles de Fitte; admission €3-10; ☉11am-7pm Sat & Sun, 10am-

6pm Wed-Fri) As its name suggests, this red-brick structure was once the city's main abattoir, but it's now been reinvented as a cutting-edge art gallery and venue for concerts and exhibitions.

Hôtel d'Assézat

MUSEUM

(www.fondation-bemberg.fr; place d'Assézat; ☉10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun, to 9pm Thu) Toulouse boasts over fifty *hôtels particulier*, private mansions built for the city's nobles, merchants and aristocrats during the 16th and 17th centuries. One of the finest is the Hôtel d'Assézat, built for a woad merchant in 1555 and now home to the **Fondation Bemberg**, renowned for its fine collection of paintings, sculpture and objets d'art; the 1st floor is mainly devoted to the Renaissance, while impressionism, pointillism and other 20th-century movements occupy the upper floor. Guided tours depart daily at 3.30pm.

Château d'Eau

GALLERY

(www.galeriechateau.dau.org; 1 place Laganne; adult/child €2.50/free; ☉1-7pm Tue-Sun) Photography exhibitions inside a 19th-century water tower.

Musée St-Raymond

MUSEUM

(www.saintraymond.toulouse.fr; place St-Sernin; adult/child €3/1.50; ☉10am-7pm) The city's archaeological museum houses Roman sculptures, Christian sarcophagi and Celtic torques.

Musée Paul Dupuy

MUSEUM

(13 rue de la Pléau; adult/child €3/free; ☉10am-6pm Wed-Mon) Toulouse's decorative arts museum takes in everything from suits of armour to rare clocks.

Museum de Toulouse

MUSEUM

(www.museum.toulouse.fr; 35 allée Jules-Guesde; adult/child €7/5; ☉10am-6pm) Dino-saur skeletons, ancient fossils and giant reptiles take centre stage at the natural history museum.

Cathédrale de St-Étienne

CATHEDRAL

(Cathedral of St Stephen; place St-Étienne; ☉8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) The city cathedral dates mainly from the 12th and 13th centuries, and is worth a visit for its glorious rose window.

Église Notre Dame du Taur

CHURCH

(12 rue du Taur; ☉2-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun) Like the Basilique St-Sernin, this 14th-century church commemorates the city's patron saint, who was reputedly martyred on this very spot.



Activities

Boat Trips

CRUISES

Toulouse is a river city, and you couldn't possibly leave without venturing out onto the water. From March to November, sev-



TOULOUSE CITY PASS

The **Toulouse en Liberté card** (per adult/child €10/5) qualifies you for discounts on museum entries, guided tours, sights, accommodation, shopping and lots of other things. Pick it up at the tourist office.

eral operators run scenic boat trips along the Garonne from the quai de la Daurade, and in summer trips also pass through the St-Pierre lock onto the Canal du Midi and Canal de Brienne.

Trips start at around adult/child €8/5 for an hour's scenic cruising. You don't normally need to book; tickets can be purchased on the boat up to 10 minutes before departure. Contact **Les Bateaux Toulousains** (☎05 61 80 22 26; www.bateaux-toulousains.com), **L'Occitania** (☎05 61 63 06 06; www.loccitania.fr), which also offers dinner cruises, and **Toulouses Croisières** (☎05 61 257 257; www.toulouse-croisieres.com).



Tours

The tourist office runs regular **walking tours** (2hr; adult/child €9/7.50) exploring Toulouse's historic buildings, as well as less frequent ones exploring everything from the city's secret gardens to its metro art. Most tours tend to be in French, although English-language ones are usually available in peak season – ask at the tourist office.

To really get under the city's skin, urban-walk specialist **La Gargouille** (☎05 34 60 12 75; www.la-gargouille.org; adult/student €6/3) runs guided hikes (in French), departing twice a month from a designated metro station.

TOULOUSE IN...

Two Days

Begin your time in Toulouse by exploring the **Vieux Quartier**, factoring in visits to the **Basilique St-Sernin**, the **Ensemble Conventuel des Jacobins** and some of the city's **hôtels particulier**. Head for lunch at **Au Jardins des Thés** or the restaurants above the **Les Halles Victor-Hugo**, then spend the afternoon exploring the city's modern art institution, **Les Abattoirs**. Book into **Chez Navarre** or **7 place St-Sernin** for supper. Kip at **Les Loges de St-Sernin** or, if you're feeling flush, **Les Bains Douches**.

On day two, spend the morning picking up some picnic supplies at the city's **markets** before blasting off for outer space at the **Cité de l'Espace**, or taking a leisurely **cruise** along the Canal du Midi and the River Garonne. Sample the gastronomic extravagance at **Anges et Démons** or the more relaxed food at **Au Coin de la Rue** for dinner, perhaps followed by a tipple or two around the bars of **place St-Pierre**.



Festivals & Events

Festival de la Violette

FLOWER FESTIVAL

Celebration of Toulouse's favourite flower in early February.

Le Marathon des Mots

CULTURAL FESTIVAL

(www.lemarathondesmots.com, in French) 'Word Marathon' revelling in language and literature for four days in June.

Toulouse d'Été

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Jazz, classical and other music around town in July and August.

Piano aux Jacobins

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.pianojacobins.com) Piano recitals in Église des Jacobins in September.

Jazz sur Son 31

JAZZ FESTIVAL

International jazz festival in October.



Sleeping

Toulouse's hotels are strongly geared towards the business crowd, so rates unusually drop at weekends and in July and August. If you're bringing your car, parking can be a real headache. Some hotels offer private garages (usually for an extra charge) or discounted rates at nearby city car parks; otherwise you'll be stuck with expensive street parking.



Anjali Maison d'Hôtes

B&B €€

(09 54 22 42 93; www.anjali.fr; 86 grande rue St-Michel; r €80-125; ☎) Taking a 19th-century house with wooden shutters and a secret walled garden as her canvas, Delphine has created four delightful rooms,

each with its own art-inspired quirk. Hamptons is as serene as the journeys to southern India that inspired it; family-friendly Brédaury offers boatlike bunk beds; Tolosa is for wheelchair guests; and black-and-white Cinema Paradiso has its own bedside projector to screen films.

Les Loges de St-Sernin

B&B €€

(05 61 24 44 44; www.dormiratoulouse.net; 12 rue St-Bernard; r €110-125; ☎) The city's prettiest *chambre d'hôte*, hidden behind an elegant rosy facade just a hop and a skip from the basilica. Owner Sylviane Tatin has polished up her rooms in lively shades of pink, lime and butter-yellow: try St-Sernin, with its exposed stone walls, or Garonne, with its dinky balcony.

Les Bains Douches

HOTEL €€€

(05 62 72 52 52; www.hotel-bainsdouches.com; 4 & 4bis rue du Pont Guilhemery; d €140-210, ste €280-330; ☎) If it's style you want, it's style you'll find in abundance at this uber-cool establishment, created from scratch by Monsieur and Madame Henriette (motorbike designer and interior designer respectively). They've pulled out all the stops to make this Toulouse's design choice par excellence: shimmering chrome fixtures, sleek surfaces, statement light fittings and a salon-bar that wouldn't look out of place in Paris' more fashionable *arrondissements*.

Hôtel St-Sernin

HOTEL €€

(05 61 21 73 08; www.hotelstsernin.com; 2 rue St-Bernard; d €111-131; ☎) Another swish little number in the shadow of the Basilique St-Sernin, renovated by a Parisian couple with a sharp eye for interior design. It's beautifully finished – slate-grey walls, crisp white sheets, splashes of zesty colour – but prices have taken an unwelcome hike since the renovations were completed, and you'll need to book well ahead if you want basilica views.

Le Clos des Potiers

HOTEL €€

(05 61 47 15 15; www.le-clos-des-potiers.com; 12 rue des Potiers; d £100-125, ste €150-225; ☎) This little-known hideaway installed in a *hôtel particulier* near the Cathédrale St-Etienne is one of Toulouse's best-kept secrets – and long may it stay that way. The eight rooms (and two suites) blend the bespoke feel of an upmarket B&B (antique rugs, interesting furniture, original mantelpieces) with the comfort and efficiency of a smart hotel (private garden, lovely lounge, treat tray).

AIRBUS TOURS

About 10km west of the city in Colomiers is the gargantuan HQ for Airbus, the world-renowned aerospace manufacturer. It's possible to arrange guided tours around the **Jean Luc Lagardère factory** (adult/child €14/11), which mainly builds its A380 aircraft. There's also an optional add-on to see Concorde No 1 (adult/child €4.50/3), one of the first production models of the landmark supersonic aircraft ever to be built (and which later served as the French president's private plane).

Tours must be booked in advance through **Taxiway** (www.taxiway-resa.fr). Cameras are forbidden and you'll need to remember to bring a passport or other form of photo ID.

THE CANAL DU MIDI

Stretching for 240 languid kilometres between Toulouse and the sultry southern port of Sète, the Canal du Midi is one of the great waterways of southern France. Built in the 17th century and classified as a World Heritage Site since 1996, the canal links the Étang de Thau in the south with the Garonne River in Toulouse. Along with the Canal de Garonne, it forms part of the 'Canal des Deux Mers' (Canal of the Two Seas), which enables boats to enjoy an uninterrupted passage between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

The canal was originally commissioned by Louis XIV in 1666 and constructed by the farmer-turned-engineer Pierre-Paul Riquet. It was an enormous engineering enterprise, and took 15 years to complete at enormous expense: in order to overcome the difficult and varied terrain, as well as the ever-present danger of flooding, Riquet had to construct an elaborate system of over 90 locks and 40 aqueducts, as well as a host of dams and bridges, and the first subterranean canal tunnel ever constructed in France.

The canal finally opened in 1681 as the Canal Royal de Languedoc, but it had taken its toll on Riquet: he died several months before the official opening, having racked up enormous personal debts in the hope of recouping costs when the canal finally opened to commercial traffic.

The canal went on to become an important industrial thoroughfare, before it was finally eclipsed by the advent of the railway in the mid-19th century. These days it's mainly used by pleasure-boaters; the tourist office in Toulouse can help with details of local canal hire companies if you feel inspired to explore the canal under your own steam.

Lastly, it's well worth taking a trip upriver to the **Musée Canal du Midi** (www.musee-canaldumidi.fr; bd Pierre-Paul Riquet, St-Ferréol; adult/child €4/2; ☎10am-7pm), which explores the history of the canal and the life of Paul Riquet among lovely grounds. It's in the village of St-Ferréol, roughly halfway between Toulouse and Castres along the D2 and D622.

Hôtel des Beaux Arts

HOTEL €€€

(☎05 34 45 42 42; www.hoteldesbeauxarts.com; 1 place du Pont Neuf; d €110-250; 🍷🍷) This handsome heritage hotel sits in a fine spot overlooking the Garonne; unfortunately, it's also on one of the city's busiest commuter routes, so traffic noise can be a problem. But inside you're in for a treat: downstairs, a book-lined lobby stuffed with armchairs and objets d'art and an excellent brasserie; upstairs, individual rooms boasting bespoke wallpaper and snazzy scatter cushions. Breakfast is steep at €14.

Hôtel La Chartreuse

HOTEL €

(☎05 61 62 93 39; www.chartreusehotel.com; 4bis bd de Bonrepos; s/d/tr €41/47/57) Station hotels in French cities always tend to be a tad scruffy, and Toulouse is certainly no exception, but this super family-run establishment is a really welcome surprise: clean, friendly and surprisingly quiet, with a lovely little breakfast room and back garden patio. Sure the rooms are a little fusty and small, but for this price, what do you expect?

Hôtel Albert 1er

HOTEL €€

(☎05 61 21 17 91; www.hotel-albert1.com; 8 rue Rivals; d €69-89; 🍷🍷) The city-centre position is the main selling point at this grand old girl, run by the same family for three generations. The rooms are bright and cosy, decked out in colourful checks and cool creams, and the €10 breakfast spread is well worth the outlay.

Hôtel St-Claire

HOTEL €€

(☎05 34 405 888; www.stclairehotel.fr; 29 place Bachelier; s €63-69, d €69-129; 🍷) Don't be deterred by the uninspiring exterior: inside this small hotel is a haven of cosiness, with rooms in sunny yellows and creams, spiced up with splashes of feng shui style. Rates at weekends are particularly tempting.



Eating

Bd de Strasbourg, place St-Georges and the western side of place du Capitole are one big café-terrace line-up, perfect for lunch and hot in summer when everything spills outside, but the quality can be very variable

when the tables fill up. Rue Pargaminières is the street for kebabs, burgers and other such late-night student grub.

7 Place St-Sernin

REGIONAL CUISINE €€€

(☎05 62 30 05 30; www.7placesaintsernin.com; mains €27-31) For fine French dining, this supremely accomplished restaurant is Toulouse's top address. Head chef Benoît Cantalloube has made a name for himself as one of the city's leading talents; classic southwest ingredients (St-Jacques scallops, Charolais beef, Quercy lamb, Tarbais haricot beans) feature heavily in his cooking, and the setting in a converted church building with views of the basilica is rather lovely. Bookings recommended.

Chez Navarre

GASCON €€

(☎05 62 26 43 06; 49 grande rue Nazareth; lunch/dinner menu €13/20; ☹Mon-Fri) Fancy rubbing shoulders with the locals? Then this wonderful *table d'hôte* is definitely the place, with honest Gascon cuisine served up beneath a creaky beamed ceiling at communal candlelit tables. There's usually only one main meal, supplemented by a soup and a terrine, but its unstarchy atmosphere and unstarry cuisine are hugely convincing.

Au Jardin des Thés

CAFÉ €€

(16 place St-Georges; menus €12.50-15.50) You only have to take one look at the perennially packed-out terrace of this café to know how popular it is with the locals. Salads, *tartes salées* (savoury tarts) and other lunchy treats attract the local office crowd, and it's also a fine spot for afternoon tea, with shady views over one of the city's smartest squares.

Les Halles Victor Hugo

BISTRO €

(place Victor Hugo; menus €10-20; ☹lunch Tue-Sun) For a quintessentially French experi-

ence, join the punters at the string of tiny restaurants on the 1st floor of the Victor Hugo food market. They're lunchtime only, and the food is straightforward, simple and unfussy, but they're full of character and the menus are brilliant value.

Faim des Haricots

CAFÉ €

(www.lafaimdesharicots.fr; 3 rue du Puits Vert; ☹Mon-Sat; ☹) A great idea, this – a 100% veggie/wholefood restaurant where everything's served *à volonté* (all you can eat). There are five courses to choose from, usually including a savoury tart, salad, a couple of hot dishes and a pudding; €15.50 buys you the lot with a *pichet* (pitcher) of wine thrown in.

Anges et Démons

CONCEPT DINING €€

(☎05 61 52 66 69; www.restaurant-angesetdemon.com; 1 rue Perchepinte; menus €37-54; ☹dinner Tue-Sat) The city's hot new tip for destination dining, where eating becomes a minor art form. The setting is suitably trendy – moody lighting, exposed brick and minimal furniture, offset by the odd cherub or two – and the menu is a whistle-stop tour of outré ingredients, from yellow chanterelles and mini-asparagus to back of rabbit and veal liver. Superb.

Au Coin de la Rue

BISTRO €€

(2 rue Pargaminières; menu €19-22) This street-corner bistro is a reliable stalwart for simple, unpretentious food, served with the usual dash of French panache. The interior is cute, with a twinkling chandelier and teeny tables, and there's a small pavement patio where you can watch the city spin by.

Emile

FRENCH €€€

(www.restaurant-emile.com; place St-Georges; mains €26-31, menus €36-55; ☹Tue-Sat) Long-standing address for old-school French dining, in business since the 1940s, which

CHILLING ON THE CANAL

When the summer sun gets too much in Toulouse, the Canal du Midi makes an ideal place to escape. Here are a few suggestions on ways to unwind on the water...

Buddha Boat Spa (☎05 61 55 54 87; www.buddhaboat.fr; bd Montplaisir; ☹11am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun) Luxuries at this state-of-the-art barge-spa include a Turkish bath, sauna and sun deck. Just the place for escaping the hustle of the city.

La Terrasse aux Violettes (☎05 61 99 01 30; www.lamaisondelaviolette.fr; cakes €3-8; ☹2-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Opposite the train station, this button-cute barge serves up dainty cakes, afternoon teas and ice-creams flavoured with Toulouse's trademark flower, the violet.

regularly graces the pages of the top foodie guides. It's especially known for its *cassoulet*, touted as the city's best.

Self-Catering

Toulouse has two fantastic covered food markets, **Les Halles Victor Hugo** (place Victor Hugo; ☺7am-1pm Tue-Sun) and **Marché des Carmes** (place des Carmes; ☺7am-1pm Tue-Sun), as well as lots of intriguing delis and specialist suppliers. A few of our favourites:

Boulangerie St-Georges

BAKERY €

(6 place St-Georges; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Great sandwich shop; the €7.50 *formule déjeuner* includes a sandwich, drink and dessert.

Papillotes et Berlingots

SWEET SHOP €

(www.papillotes-berlingots.fr; 49 rue des Filatiers; ☺noon-7pm Mon, 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat) Candy fans will be in seventh heaven at this olde-worlde sweet shop; look out for chocolate and sweets flavoured with Toulouse's trademark violet.

Le Fournil de Victor Hugo

BAKERY €

(place Victor Hugo; ☺10am-5pm Mon-Sat) Artisan breads and freshly made sandwiches.

Le Paradis Gourmand

GOURMET FOOD €

(65 rue des Tourneurs; ☺10am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) Biscuits, sweets and other gastronomic goodies.

Xavier

CHEESE SHOP €

(place Victor Hugo; ☺9.30am-1.15pm & 2.30-7.15pm, closed Mon) The city's best cheese shop.



Drinking

Almost every square in the Vieux Quartier has at least one café, busy day and night. Other busy after-dark streets include rue Castellane, rue Gabriel Péri and near the river around place St-Pierre.

Au Père Louis

BAR

(45 rue des Tourneurs; ☺8.30am-3pm & 5-10.30pm Mon-Sat) This gorgeous street-side bar has been slaking the city's thirst since 1889, and it's crammed with interesting nooks and crannies. Lots of wines and beers, and a rather nice line in afternoon tea.

Le Bar Basque

BAR

(7 place St-Pierre; ☺11am-2am Mon-Fri, 1pm-5am Sat, 1pm-2am Sun) Lively sports bar with a huge outside terrace where Toulousiens like to congregate when the rugby's on.

L'Autre Salon de Thé

CAFÉ

(☺05 61 22 11 63; 45 rue des Tourneurs; lunch menu €12-14, Sun brunch €17; ☺noon-7pm) An old-world tearoom wedged onto Toulouse's oldest bar, **Au Père Louis**, this sweet spot is perfect for a tart-and-salad lunch or a cuppa poured from a flowery old-fashioned china teapot. Its cakes are particularly irresistible.

Bodega Bodega

BAR

(1 rue Gabriel Péri; tapas €4.50-10; ☺7pm-2am) All the fun of the *fêria* in a historic building where the tax authority once lived. It heaves at weekends with live music, and the tapas is tip-top.

Café des Artistes

CAFÉ

(13 place de la Daurade; ☺11am-2am) A popular café with the city's artsy set, who come to sip cappuccinos and aperitifs with views of the Garonne.

La Couleur de la Culotte

CLUB

(14 place St-Pierre; ☺9am-2pm) Funky café-club decked out in zesty shades of pink, orange and blue, offset by plenty of exposed brick and retro styling. Coffees and light bites by day, with DJs spinning electro and ambient after dark.

La Maison

BAR

(☺05 61 62 87 22; 9 rue Gabriel Péri; ☺5pm-2am) 'The House' is a hip, shabby-chic hang-out for students and trendy types, with plenty of scruffy sofas and second-hand chairs dotted round the old townhouse, and house cocktails and imported beers behind the bar.

Opus Café

CLUB

(24 rue Bachelier; ☺11pm-6am) Dance until dawn at this much-loved venue for seasoned clubbers who flock here late for that quintessential French *l'after*.



Entertainment Cinemas

The city's top places to watch films in *v.o.* (*version originale*, ie not dubbed) are the cinephile **Cinéma ABC** (www.abc-toulouse.fr; 13 rue St-Bernard) and art-house **Cinéma-thèque de Toulouse** (www.lacinematheque-detoulouse.com; 69 rue du Taur).

Live Music

Toulouse has a crackling live-music and clubbing scene. Pick up free listings guides at the *billetterie spectacles* (box office) in **Fnac** (16 allée Franklin Roosevelt), or check <http://toulouse.sortir.eu> for the latest events.

Le Cri de la Mouette

(www.lecridelamouette.com; 78 allée de Barcelone) Club-bar and gig venue on a converted canal boat.

MUSIC, CLUB

Le Bikini

(www.lebikini.com; rue Hermès, Ramonville St-Agne) Legendary music club which has been rocking for nigh on a quarter-century. At the end of metro line B (Ramonville metro stop).

ROCK

Le Saint des Seins

(www.lesaintdesseins.com; 5 place St-Pierre) Hip corner club on place St-Pierre, with regular jam sessions and gigs.

JAZZ, LIVE MUSIC

Le Zénith

(11 av Raymond Badiou) The city's big stadium concert venue. Near Arènes and Patte d'Oie metro stops.

CONCERTS

Rest'ô Jazz

(www.restojazz.com; 8 rue Amélie; ☺closed Sun) Dark, atmospheric and jazzy.

JAZZ



Shopping

Mainstream shopping embraces rue du Taur, rue d'Alsace-Lorraine, rue de la Pomme, rue des Arts and nearby streets. The place St-Georges area is boutique-fashionable.

Markets include a bit-of-everything **market** (place du Capitole; ☺Wed), a **flea market** (place St-Sernin; ☺Sat & Sun) and an antiquarian **book market** (place St-Étienne; ☺Sat).



Information

Laverie des Lois (19 rue des Lois; http://laverie.deslois.spaces.live.com; per hr €4; ☺cybercafé 9.30am-9pm, laundrette 8am-9pm) Surf the net while your smocks wash.

Le Ch@t de la Voisine (25 rue des Sept Troubadours; per hr €2; ☺10am-midnight) Internet access.

Tourist office (☺05 61 11 02 22; www.toulouse-tourisme.com; square Charles de Gaulle; ☺9am-7pm) Shorter hours outside of summer.



Getting There & Away

AIR Toulouse-Blagnac Airport (www.toulouse.aeroport.fr/en) Eight kilometres northwest of the centre, Toulouse's main airport has frequent flights to Paris and other large French cities, plus major hubs in the UK (including London Gatwick and Stansted, Bristol, Leeds and Manchester), Spain (Barcelona, Madrid, Seville), Italy (Milan, Naples, Rome, Venice) and Germany (Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, Breme). Budget carriers serving the airport include Easyjet, BMI Baby, Ryanair, KLM, Flybe and Germanwings.

BUS As always in France, you'll find it much simpler to use the train to get around; bus services are provided by a number of different operators and mainly operate according to the school timetable. All buses and coaches stop at the **Gare Routière** (bus station; bd Pierre Sémard).

TRAIN Buy tickets at the **SNCF boutique** (5 rue Peyras) in town or at Toulouse's main train station, **Gare Matabiau** (bd Pierre Sémard), 1km northeast of the centre. Toulouse is served by frequent fast TGVs, which run west to Montauban, Agen and Bordeaux (which has connections to Bayonne and the southwest, plus Paris), and east to Carcassonne, Narbonne, Montpellier and beyond. Most smaller towns are served by slower Corail trains.

Destinations:

Albi €12.00, one hour

Auch €13.60, 1½ hours

Bayonne €39.90, 3¼ hours

Bordeaux €36.90, two hours

Carcassonne €12, one hour

Castres €13.40, 1¼ hours

Lourdes €25.10, 1¾ hours

Montauban €8.50, 30 minutes

Pau €29.00, 2¼ hours



Getting Around

To/from the Airport

The **Navette Aéroport Flybus** (airport shuttle; ☺05 61 41 70 70; www.tisseo.fr) links the airport with town (single €5, 20 minutes, every 20 minutes from 5am to 8.20pm from town and 7.35am to midnight from the airport). Catch the bus in front of the bus station, outside the Jean Jaurès metro station or at place Jeanne d'Arc. The trip takes between 20 and 40 minutes depending on traffic.

A **taxi** (☺05 61 30 02 54) to/from town costs €25 to €35. Taxis can be booked through one central reservation number.

Bicycle

The city's bike-hire scheme **Vélo Toulouse** (www.velo.toulouse.fr) has pick-up/drop-off stations dotted every 300m or so round the city. A day/week ticket costs €1/5, plus a €150 credit-card deposit (you'll need a chip and pin card to work the automated machines).

If you'd rather let someone else do the work, Toulouse's bike-taxi scheme **Cycloville** (www.cycloville.com; ☺11am-7pm Mon-Sat) has stations on place Esquirol, place Jeanne d'Arc and allée Jean-Jaurès. It costs €1 minimum fare plus €1 per person per kilometre.

Bus & Metro

Local buses and the two-line metro are run by **Tisséo** (www.tisseo.fr), which has ticket kiosks

located on place Jeanne d'Arc and cours Dillon. A one-way/return ticket for either costs €1.40/2.50, a 10-ticket carnet is €11.70 and a one-/two-day pass is €4.20/7.

Most bus lines run daily until at least 8pm (night bus lines 10pm to midnight).

Albi

POP 48,600

Looming up from the centre of Albi is one of southwest France's most monumental structures, the enormous Gothic Cathédrale Ste-Cécile. It's more castle than cathedral, with soaring fortified walls built to provide sanctuary from the religious conflicts that plagued the city throughout much of the Middle Ages.

Cathedral aside, Albi's main claim to fame is as the birthplace of one of France's most beloved painters, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, whose artistic exploits in the bars and brothels of turn-of-the-century Paris are evocatively explored at the town's fantastic Musée Toulouse-Lautrec.



Sights & Activities

Cathédrale Ste-Cécile

CATHEDRAL

(place Ste-Cécile; ☉9am-6.30pm) Right at the heart of Albi is the mighty Cathédrale Ste-Cécile, which was begun in 1282 but took well over a century to complete. Attractive isn't the word – what strikes you most is its sheer mass rising over town like some Tolkienesque tower rather than a place of Christian worship.

Step inside and the contrast with that brutal exterior is astonishing. No surface was left untouched by the Italian artists who, in the early 16th century, painted their way, chapel by chapel, the length of

its vast nave. An intricately carved, lacy rood screen, many of its statues smashed in the Revolution, spans the sanctuary. The stained-glass windows in the apse and choir date from the 14th to 16th centuries.

On no account miss the **grand chœur** (great choir; adult/child €2/free) with its frescos, chapels and 30 biblical polychrome figures, finely carved in stone.

At the western end, behind today's main altar, is *Le Jugement Dernier* (The Last Judgement; 1490), a vivid doomsday horror show of the damned being boiled in oil, beheaded or tortured by demons and monsters.

Look out for organ concerts in July and August (5pm Wednesday, 4pm Sunday).

Musée Toulouse-Lautrec

MUSEUM

(www.museetoulouselautrec.net; place Ste-Cécile; adult/student €5/2.50; ☉9am-6pm, closed Tue Oct-Mar) Lodged inside another of Albi's impressive red-brick landmarks, the Palais de la Berbie (built in the early Middle Ages for the town's archbishop), this wonderful museum offers a comprehensive overview of the life and career of Albi's most celebrated son. The museum owns over 500 original works by Toulouse-Lautrec (the largest collection in France outside the Musée d'Orsay), spanning the artist's development from his early impressionist influences on



ALBI CITY PASS

This **card** (€6.50), sold at the tourist office, gives free admission to the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec and cathedral choir and offers other concessions around town.

TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), Albi's most famous son, was famously short. As a teenager he broke both legs in separate accidents, stunting his growth and leaving him unable to walk without his trademark canes.

He spent his early 20s studying painting in Paris, where he mixed with other artists including Van Gogh. In 1890, at the height of the belle époque, he abandoned impressionism and took to observing and sketching Paris' colourful nightlife. His favourite subjects included cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, cancan dancers from the Moulin Rouge and prostitutes from the rue des Moulins, sketched to capture movement and expression in a few simple lines.

With sure, fast strokes he would sketch on whatever was at hand – a scrap of paper or a tablecloth, tracing paper or buff-coloured cardboard. He also became a skilled and sought-after lithographer and poster designer until drinking and general overindulgence in the heady nightlife scene led to his premature death in 1901.

route to his celebrated poster art and Parisian brothel scenes.

Pride of place goes to two versions of the *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins*, hung side-by-side to illustrate the artist's subtly different technique. Elsewhere around the museum, look out for a fascinating collection of Toulouse-Lautrec portraits and works by artists of the period (including Degas, Matisse and Rodin) on the top floor.

A short stroll away is the privately owned **Maison Natale de Toulouse-Lautrec** (14 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) where the artist was born. Next-door neighbour is **La Maison de Lapérouse** (14 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec), where the Albi-born explorer lived before sailing around the Pacific in 1785; guided visits can be arranged for groups via the tourist office.

Old Town

ARCHITECTURE

Veil Albi is an attractive muddle of winding streets and half-timbered houses, one

of which, the **Maison du Veil Alby** (1 rue de la Croix Blanche; ☎3-7pm Mon, 10.30-12.30 & 3-7pm Tue-Sat) houses a small exhibition on the city's history and its connections with Toulouse-Lautrec.

Boat Trips

CRUISES

From June to September, **Albi Croisières** (www.albi-croisieres.com) runs half-hour **boat trips** (adult/child €6/4; ☎11am, 11.45am & every 40min 2-6pm) aboard a *gabarre*, a flat-bottomed sailing barge of the kind used to haul goods down the Garonne to Bordeaux. Boats depart from the Berges du Tarn landing stage.

For a longer spell on the river, the company also offers **full-day trips** (single/return €15/23) between the village of Aiguelèze, near Gaillac, and Albi. Trips depart at 10am and include an afternoon in Albi, with the return journey arriving back in Aiguelèze around 7pm.

Albi





Festivals & Events

Carnaval

CARNIVAL

Albi celebrates Carnaval at the beginning of Lent (February or March) with gusto and confetti.

Voix-là

MUSIC FESTIVAL

In May, Voix-là (it's a pun) celebrates vocal music in all its richness.

Pause Guitare

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Guitar concerts and traditional vocals in the sumptuous space of place Ste-Cécile. Held in July.



Sleeping

Hôtel St-Clair

HOTEL €

(☎05 63 54 25 66; <http://andrieu.michele.free.fr>; 8 rue St-Clair; s €40-48, d €48-75; ☎☎) You couldn't ask for a more central position; this higgledy-piggledy hotel is slap-bang in the centre of town, lodged inside a pretty medieval building. It's a real rabbit's warren inside – wonky floors, hefty beams and low ceilings galore – but it's quaint and charming, and on sunny days breakfast is served on a lovely enclosed terrace. Private parking is available (some distance away) for €8.

Le Vieil Alby

HOTEL €

(☎05 63 54 14 69; <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/le-vieil-alby>; 25 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; s/d €44/53; ☎closed Jan) Now part of the Logis group, this is another great old-fashioned French hotel perched on the fringes of the old city. The rooms are plain but very pleasant, but the real draw here is the excellent terroir **restaurant**.

Les Buis de St-Martin

B&B €€

(☎05 63 55 41 23; <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/les-buis-de-saint-martin>; 11 rue St-Martin, Marssac sur Tarn; d €110; ☎) It's a bit of a drive west of town (10km, in fact), but if you've got your own wheels this divine château *chambre d'hôte* in a 19th-century residence is well worth investigating. The two bedrooms

(Sophie and Julie) are elegantly done in soft shades of beige, and there's a self-contained *gîte* (cottage) for longer stays. Breakfast is served in the lovely country kitchen.



Eating

Albi has loads of places to eat, including a whole string of places on rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, just downhill from the cathedral.

Le Lautrec

RESTAURANT €€

(☎05 63 54 86 55; 13-15 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; lunch menus €15-17, dinner menus €16-38; ☎lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) This excellent restaurant is right opposite the Toulouse-Lautrec family home (in its former life it served as the carriage house and horse stables). It's now one of our favourite food finds in Albi, offering a market-driven menu brimming with Gascon goodness and Gaillac wines, and a choice of tempting settings: a knick-knack-packed interior or an outside patio shaded by fragrant wisteria.

L'Epicurien

RESTAURANT €€€

(☎05 63 53 10 70; www.restaurantlepicurien.com; 42 place Jean Jaurès; menus €26-68; ☎Tue-Sat) The steely grey and glass facade says it all: this establishment is a temple to cutting-edge contemporary French cuisine, run by Swedish chef Rikard Hult and his wife Patricia. The presentation is so arty you'll almost feel guilty tucking into the dishes: delicate towers of roast monkfish or lamb noisettes, accompanied by an arty slash of sauce or a just-so sprig of herb. An utter spoil.

La Table du Sommelier

BISTRO €€

(☎05 63 46 20 10; 20 rue Porta; lunch menus €13-16, dinner menus €25; ☎Tue-Sat) Across the 11th-century Pont Vieux is this bright, friendly bistro where the food almost takes a back seat to the wines: the owner's a qualified sommelier, and he's passionately knowledgeable about local vintages.

Albi

📍 Top Sights

- Cathédrale St-Cécile..... B2
- Musée Toulouse-Lautrec B2

📍 Sights

- 1 Boat Trips..... A1
- 2 La Maison de Lapérouse..... B3
- 3 Maison Natale de Toulouse-Lautrec.... B3
- 4 Palais de la Berbie B2

📍 Sleeping

- 5 Hôtel St-Clair B3
- 6 Le Vieil Alby B3

📍 Eating

- 7 Covered Market..... B2
- 8 Le Lautrec..... B3
- 9 L'Epicurien..... D4
- 10 L'Esprit du Vin B1

L'Esprit du Vin

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎05 63 54 60 44; 11 quai Choiseul; menus €60-98; ☉Tue-Sat) David Enjalran's gastronomic restaurant is a gutbuster, renowned for lavish spreads of fine French food with a sky-high price tag to match. Menus are divided into five 'ateliers' (levels), and take their culinary cue from the changing seasons: the approach is very much Michelin-style, so it might be a bit stuffy for some. The lunchtime 'Pause Gourmande' is marginally more affordable at €23/27 for one/two courses. Reservations recommended.

Le Vieil Alby

GASCON €€

(☎05 63 54 14 69; 25 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; menus from €17.50; ☉closed Jan) For authentic southwest flavours, this hotel restaurant is hard to better – it's a specialist in rich, traditional Gascon fare, heavy on the beef, duck and tarbais beans. House specials include homemade melsat sausages, dried pork stuffed with radishes and (of course) piping hot *cassoulet*.

Self-catering

Albi's landmark turn-of-the-century **covered market** (place St-Julien; ☉8am-2pm plus 5-8pm Fri & Sat) is (as usual) a foodie delight. You can even fill up your water bottle with wine (€1.10 a litre).



Information

Post office (place du Vigan)

Tourist office (www.albi-tourisme.fr; place Ste-Cécile; ☉9am-7pm) Ask for one of the themed walking leaflets around old Albi. Staff make hotel reservations (free by phone or email, €2 in situ). Shorter hours outside summer.



Getting There & Away

Pick up information on local bus services at **Espace Albibus** (14 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; ☉2-5pm Mon, 10am-5pm Tue-Fri). From the main bus stop on place Jean Jaurès, buses serve Castres (€2, 50 minutes, up to 10 daily).

From the **train station** (place Stalingrad) there are trains to/from Rodez (€13, 1½ hours, seven daily), Millau (€21.50, 2¾ hours, two daily) and Toulouse (€12, one hour, at least hourly).

Castres

POP 42,900

Founded by the Romans as a *castrum* (settlement), this sleepy town is best-known as the birthplace of Jean Jaurès, the founding father of French socialism, but it's mainly

worth visiting for the **Musée Goya** (goya@ville-castres.fr; Hôtel de Ville, rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/child €3/free; ☉10am-6pm), which houses a renowned collection of Spanish art, including works by Goya, Murillo, Ribera and Picasso. The museum's gardens were laid out by Le Nôtre, architect of Versailles' parkland.

La Terrasse de Lautrec

B&B €

(☎05 63 75 84 22; rue de l'Eglise; d €75-105; Lautrec; ☉) In the quiet village of Lautrec, a few miles drive north of Castres, this excellent *chambre d'hôte* offers spacious rooms with an air of bygone elegance: lofty ceilings, original cornicing, mantelpieces, upholstered furniture and an amazing salon with its own painted rococo fresco. Parking available.

Montauban

POP 53,200

Bastides (fortified towns) litter the landscape of southwest France, and there's no finer example than Montauban, nestled on the banks of the River Tarn. Founded in 1144, Montauban is southern France's second-oldest *bastide* (the oldest is Mont-de-Marsan). All roads lead to its characteristic central square, **place Nationale**, hemmed in on every side by arcaded walkways and tall pink buildings. Many of the streets around the square would originally have marked the town's fortified walls; the town was badly battered during both the Hundred Years War and the Wars of Religion, and famously withstood an 86-day siege imposed by Louis XIII in 1621 during which the defenders resorted to eating horses, rats and dogs to survive.



Sights

Musée Ingres

ART MUSEUM

(13 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/child €4/free; ☉10am-6pm) Apart from the pleasure of wandering round Montauban's shady streets, the main focus of a visit is this fine arts museum, which centres on the work of the neoclassical painter (and accomplished violinist) Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, who was born in Montauban in 1780. Inspired by Poussin and David, Ingres became one of the most celebrated portrait painters of his day, and the museum houses many of his key works alongside old masters such as Tintoretto, Van Dyck and Gustave Courbet. The entry ticket also admits you to the

GAILLAC WINES

Eat out at any restaurant in this corner of France and you're pretty much guaranteed to stumble across the name of Gaillac somewhere on the menu. This little village is one of the area's top wine producers, particularly known for its rosés, light whites and rich, summery reds.

The vineyards around Gaillac are among the oldest winegrowing areas in France, first planted by the Romans, and benefiting from a kind of crossroads climate halfway between the balmy summer temperatures of the Mediterranean and the cooling rains of the Atlantic.

There are several AOCs (Appellation d'Origines Controlées) covering the Gaillac area, including Gaillac Rouge, Gaillac Blanc Sec and Gaillac Rosé, as well as more unusual ones such as AOC Gaillac Perle (for the area's sparkling or *petillant* white wine) and AOC Mousseux Methode Gaillacacoise (for a special type of Champagne-style sparkling wine made by only a few of the area's vineyards).

There are lots of châteaux dotted around the area offering *dégustation* (tasting) and cellar visits, connected by a signposted Route des Vins (Wine Route).

Have a look at the useful site www.vins-gaillac.com for more information, or contact the **Gaillac Tourist Office** (☎ 05 63 57 14 65; tourisme@ville-gaillac.fr; pl St-Michel), which can help you arrange local vineyard visits.

nearby Histoire Naturelle (natural history), Terroir (local costumes and traditions) and Résistance et Déportation (with mementos of WWII) **museums**.

Another Ingres masterpiece, *Le Vœu de Louis XIII*, depicting the king pledging France to the Virgin, hangs in Montauban's 18th-century **Cathédrale Notre Dame de l'Assomption** (place Franklin Roosevelt; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat).



Festivals & Events

Alors Chante

SONG FESTIVAL

A festival of French song in May.

Jazz à Montauban

JAZZ FESTIVAL

A week-long jam in July.

Légende des Quatre-Cent Coups

STREET FESTIVAL

(400 Blows) This weekend street festival at the end of August commemorates the moment when, says local lore, a fortune-teller told Louis XIII, besieging Montauban, to blast off 400 cannons simultaneously against the town, which still failed to fall.



Sleeping

Mas des Anges

B&B €€

(☎ 05 63 24 27 05; www.lemasdesanges.com; ☎) Five miles south of Montauban is this idyllic rural retreat, a working vineyard surrounded by 4.5 hectares of old vines. It's run by Sophie and Juan Kervyn, a friendly couple who've made winemaking into a life-

long passion. The three ground-floor rooms each have a slightly different theme (African, Latin, Marine). Tree-filled grounds, a fine pool and guest barbecues are the icing on the cake.

Hôtel du Commerce

HOTEL €€

(☎ 05 63 66 31 32; www.hotel-commerce-montauban.com; 9 place Franklin Roosevelt; s €58, d €59-77; ☎) Hardly spectacular, but this smart family-run hotel is just about the city's best place to stay. Pleasant, floral rooms have shutters overlooking the cathedral square, and there's an impressive breakfast salon that still boasts its original 1930s floor tiles.

Château de Seguenville

B&B €€

(☎ 05 62 13 42 67; www.chateau-de-seguenville.com; Cabanac Séguenville; d €100-130, tr €140-180, f €180-195; ☎) Roughly equidistant from Toulouse, Montauban and Auch (and ideal for exploring all three), this spiky-roofed château *chambre d'hôte* makes a grand base for exploring the Toulouse area. A massive central staircase opens onto a 1st-floor gallery and five boho rooms, each named after aristocratic nobles and each with a different view over the gorgeous grounds.



Eating

Morning **farmers markets** are on Saturday (place Prax-Paris) and Wednesday (place Lalaque), in addition to a smaller daily one (place Nationale).

Le Meilleur Restaurant de la Rue BISTRO €€
(☎05 63 63 18 07; 52 rue de la Palisse; lunch menu €15, mains €16-21) The 'best restaurant on the street', eh? Well, who are we to argue? This sassy restaurant specialises in classic dishes with a quirky twist ('cuisine inventive', they like to call it): duck breast stuffed with goat's cheese, or herby langoustines with Turkish *kadaïf* pastry. The decor's similarly eclectic: puce chairs, starburst chandeliers, bric-a-brac, nauticalia, and a heart-meltingly pretty patio.

Au Fil de l'Eau GASTRONOMIC €€
(☎05 63 66 11 85; www.aufildeleau82.com; 14 quai du Dr Lafforgue; menus €35-50; ☺Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Ask someone in Montauban where to go for a treat, and they'll probably point you straight to this riverside restaurant, where the modern art and quirky fixtures are mirrored by the classy *cuisine gastronomique*. There's an €18 lunch menu Tuesday to Friday.

Les Boissières REGIONAL CUISINE €€
(☎05 63 24 50 02; www.lesboissieres.com; Bioule; menus €22-51) If you don't mind driving, this much-recommended restaurant in the little village of Bioule serves some of the best *cuisine régionale* for miles around. There are several *menus*: plump for the market *menu* and sit back to enjoy fresh French food in garden surroundings. The hotel rooms aren't bad, either.

Information

Tourist office (☎05 63 63 60 60; www.montauban-tourisme.com; 4 rue du Collège; ☺9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun)

Getting There & Away

From the **train station** (av Mayenne), about 1km from place Nationale across the Tarn, trains serve Toulouse (€8.50, 30 minutes, frequent), Bordeaux (€27.30, two hours, frequent) and Moissac (€5.60, 20 minutes, five daily).

Moissac

POP 12,300

Riverside Moissac has been an important stop-off on the Santiago de Compostela trail since the 12th century thanks to the glorious **Abbaye St-Pierre** (place Durand de Bredon), resplendent with some of France's finest Romanesque architecture. It's particularly known for its **typanum**, the crescent-shaped frieze above its

south portal. Completed in 1130, it depicts St John's vision of the Apocalypse, with Christ in majesty flanked by the apostles, angels and 24 awestruck elders. If you've got time, it's well worth comparing it with the one in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, which is thought to have been carved around the same time, very possibly by the same stonemasons.

Outside, the wonderful **cloister** (adult/child €5/3.50; ☺9am-7pm) is encircled by delicate marble columns, topped by carved capitals depicting foliage, figures or biblical scenes. Sadly, the Revolution took its toll – nearly every face is smashed.

Entry to the abbey is via the **tourist office** (www.moissac.fr; 6 place Durand de Bredon; ☺9am-7pm). Hours here and at the cloister are shorter outside summer.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Pont Napoléon HOTEL €
(☎05 63 04 01 55; www.le-pont-napoleon.com; 2 allée Montebello; s €43, d €50-70; ☺) This riverside hotel is beautifully situated next to the bridge built by Napoleon after his visit to Moissac in 1808. It's definitely worth splashing out on a room with a view over the Tarn; if you can, ask for the Napoléon Suite, which has a touch of designer flair with its retro-flock wallpaper and zingy colours. The hotel restaurant, **Le Table de Nos Fils** (menus €28-42; ☺Fri-Tue) is run by talented chef Patrick Delaroux, who also runs weekend cooking courses.

Le Moulin de Moissac HOTEL €€
(☎05 63 32 88 88; www.lemoulindemoissac.com; in French; esplanade du Moulin; d €80-152; ☺) Housed in a 15th-century grain mill overlooking the Tarn, this is another treat. In the rooms, distressed wallpaper, wicker chairs and tall French windows opening onto river-view balconies; elsewhere, a super waterside **restaurant** (mains €18 to €55), a smart sauna-spa and a spiffy jacuzzi sheltered under a brick vaulted roof.

Au Château B&B €€
(☎05 63 95 96 82; www.au-chateau-stn.com; St Nicolas de la Grave; r €52-103; ☺☺☺) Despite its historic facade, this supremely swish B&B in a 19th-century mansion conceals a contemporary heart. The rooms are all designated as suites, and quite rightly: they're all huge, and the shiny wood floors, luxurious fabrics and big flatscreen TVs contrast gracefully with the house's heritage architecture. The Madeleine suite even has its

own lounge and attic bedroom. It's about 10km south of Moissac.

Getting There & Away

A few local buses serve Moissac, but it's much more convenient to catch a **train**. There are frequent connections to Montauban (€5.40, 20 minutes), which has onward services to Toulouse (€12.50).

Auch

POP 23,500

Auch has been a key crossroads since Roman times, when it became the capital of the Roman province of Novempopulana, but the town's heyday was in the Middle Ages, when the counts of Armagnac and their archbishops jointly ran the city and built its cathedral. Its second flowering was in the late 18th century, as new roads were pushed southwards to Toulouse and into the Pyrenees, and in the 20th century it became the capital of the Gers *département*.

The centre of old Auch is perched on the top of a hill, from where a jumble of lanes, steps and courtyards leads down to the banks of the River Gers and the newer quarters of town. In truth, the town's been a little down-at-heel in recent years, but a major investment program has started to clean up many of its buildings, including its famous Renaissance staircase.

Sights

Cathédrale Ste-Marie

CATHEDRAL

(☉8.30am-noon & 2-5pm) Even by French standards, Auch's cathedral is a real eye-opener: Napoleon II was so bowled over he's said to have proclaimed 'A cathedral like this should be put in a museum!'. Started in 1489 and constructed over the course of two centuries, the cathedral spans a range of architectural styles from classic Gothic to showy Renaissance. It's particularly known for its ornately carved choir, a series of stunning 16th-century stained glass windows designed by the artisan Arnaud de Moles, and a gargantuan 17th-century pipe organ, one of the largest in France, built by Jean de Joyeuse.

Little wonder that the whole building's been classed a World Heritage Site by Unesco: to appreciate it at its best, you really need to visit during a service or for one of the chamber concerts held throughout the summer. Ask at the tourist office for forthcoming events.

Behind the cathedral, the 14th-century, 40m-high **Tour d'Armagnac** was built to house the archive of Auch's archbishops, and briefly served as a prison during the Revolution.

Musée des Jacobins

MUSEUM

(4 place Louis Blanc; adult/child €4/2; ☉10am-noon & 2-6pm) This eclectic museum is one of the oldest in France, founded in 1793 inside a former Dominican monastery. Its eclectic collection came from property seized during the Revolution and includes early Gallo-Roman villa frescos, pre-Columbian artefacts from the Americas and a rich collection of 19th-century Gascon costumes. Show your ticket to the cathedral's choir to get half-price admission to the museum, and vice versa.

Escalier Monumental

ARCHITECTURE

Auch's huge Escalier Monumental (Monumental Staircase) drops down to the river from place Salinis. Built in 1863, it consists of either 275 steps or 370 steps depending on whether you count the double-flighted section at the top. Either way, it's one of the grandest staircases you could ever hope to see, and halfway up you can see a stature of d'Artagnan, the fictional swashbuckling Gascon hero immortalised by Alexandre Dumas in his classic tale *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (*The Three Musketeers*). Dumas actually based the character on a real figure, Charles de Batz, a nobleman born in the town of Lupiac (about 35km southwest of Auch) around 1610.

Near the top of the staircase is **The Observatory of Time**, an abstract artwork by the Catalan artist J Plensa, commissioned to commemorate the devastating floods that swept through Auch in 1976.

The Escalier Monumental is currently the focus of a major restoration project, so at least some sections are likely to be shrouded in scaffold until 2011 at the earliest.

Sleeping

Auch is a bit short on hotels, so you might find it more convenient to visit as a day trip.

Hôtel de France

HOTEL 

(☎05 62 61 71 71; www.hoteldefrance-auch.com; 2 place de la Libération; s €67-87, d €72-92, ste €150-220; ☹) Under new owners since 2009, this hotel in the heart of Auch is still the best place to stay in town. A steady refurbishment program is slowly enlivening its rooms: most offer a pleasant blend of old-

fashioned style and modern fixtures, and if you can splash on the *chambres prestige*, you'll be a very happy bunny indeed.

Domaine de Peyloubère B&B, COTTAGES €€
(05 62 05 74 97; www.peyloubere.com; Pavie, Le Gers; 1-night stay s/d €95/125, longer €80/110, cottages per week €480-1850; 🏠🚗🐕)
This regal estate 10 minutes south of Auch is an utter treat for longer stays. Set around a listed manor house dating from the 17th century, the estate was owned by the Italian artist Mario Caviglieri until the late 1960s, and many of the gorgeous B&B rooms still sport painted frescos and cupboards designed by the artist's own hand. There's a sauna, spa and heated pool, plus five self-catering cottages that are perfect for longer stays.



Eating & Drinking

A stroll along rue Dessoles uncovers several informal, friendly bars-cum-bistros.

La Table d'Oste BISTRO €€
(www.table-oste-restaurant.com; 7 rue Lamartine; lunch/dinner menu €16/24; 🕒lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Fri) Fine dining it certainly ain't, but for no-nonsense Gascon grub, this little streetside bistro is well worth a look. Copper pans, rickety furniture and rural bric-a-brac covers the interior, and the menu's heavy on hale and hearty portions of duck, chicken, beef and foie gras.

Au Café Gascon RESTAURANT €€
(05 62 61 88 08; 5 rue Lamartine; 🕒closed Sun & dinner Mon & Tue) Next-door neighbour Georges Nosella offers slightly more sophisticated food, but it's still shot through with southwest flavours and ingredients. *Menus* must be booked in advance; otherwise the only choice is the fixed €22 meal. There's often live music while you dine.

Information

Tourist office (www.auch-tourisme.com; 1 rue Dessoles; 🕒9.30am-6.30pm) Inside the 15th-century Maison Fedel; shorter hours outside summer.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (05 62 05 76 37; av Pierre Mendès-France) buses serve Condom (€7, 50 minutes, three daily) and Agen (€12, 1½ hours, five to seven daily). Hourly trains or SNCF buses link Auch with Toulouse (€13.60, 1½ hours) from the neighbouring **train station** (av Pierre Mendès-France).

Condom

POP 7250

Poor Condom, whose name has made it the butt of so many nudge-snigger, English-language jokes (the French don't even use the word, preferring *préservatif* or, more familiarly, *capote anglaise*, meaning 'English hood'). Condom's name is actually a derivation of its old Gallo-Roman name, Condatomagus, and like many Gers towns, it later became an important waypoint for Compostela pilgrims: you'll still probably see plenty of them trudging into town.

These days Condom is a mellow, sleepy town, spanning both banks of the River Baïse. The surrounding area is largely dominated by agriculture and vineyards, and it's also a centre of production of Armagnac, the feisty firewater that's often used to flavour the local Gascon cuisine.

Sights & Activities

There's not all that much to keep you occupied in Condom itself, although the **Cathédrale St-Pierre** (place St-Pierre) is worth a peek. With its lofty nave and elaborate chancel, it's a rich example of Flamboy-

LES LINOTTES

For a slice of the good life, eco-chic **Les Linottes** (05 62 61 04 79; www.leslinottes.com; Portetery, Durban; d incl breakfast €59-65), 17km south of Auch, offers country living mixed with admirably green credentials. The creative owners, Laurence and Patrice, have made it a personal mission to restore their three-room *chambre d'hôte* using traditional eco-friendly methods: walls are built from hay-bales plastered with earth and straw, timbers are formed from reclaimed wood, bathrooms are finished in natural stone.

But despite the rustic construction methods, the rooms are utterly contemporary: each has its own little patio terrace overlooking the garden. Best of all, the creative couple behind the project have recently added an ecological swimming pool, filtered naturally by aquatic plants and reeds.

ARMAGNAC

Ask any Gascon: Armagnac slips down just as smoothly as the more heavily produced and marketed Cognac to the north. Produced from white grapes that ripen in the sandy soils hereabouts and aged in barrels of local black oak, it was originally taken for medicinal reasons but is drunk with gusto today, often as a digestive. In local restaurants, Floc de Gascogne – a liqueur wine made from Armagnac and red or white grape juice – is the traditional aperitif.

A couple of major distillers are headquartered in Condom, and driving or cycling among the vineyards, you'll stumble upon one siren-call notice after another, signalling you to taste and buy direct from a small-scale farmer-distiller in his *chais* (traditional wine cellar).

Two dreamy addresses oozing history are 13th-century **Château de Cassaigne** (☎05 62 28 04 02; www.chateaudecassaigne.com; Cassaigne; ☀10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun), 6.5km southwest of Condom, just off the D931 to Eauze, where you can visit the cellars and sample the Armagnac from its 18th-century distillery; and 17th-century **Château du Busca Maniban** (☎05 62 28 40 38; www.buscamaniban.com; Mansencomie; ☀2-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Nov), the stuff of dreams 5.5km further south along the scenic D229 in Mansencomie.

ant Gothic architecture, while on the northern side is a 16th-century **cloister**, topped with a tent-like structure built to provide shelter for Compostela pilgrims.

Musée de l'Armagnac

MUSEUM

(2 rue Jules Ferry; adult/child €2.20/1.10; ☀10am-noon & 3-6pm, closed Jan) For the lowdown on Armagnac, Gascony's traditional cockle-warming tippie, this little museum makes the ideal place to start. It offers a good overview of the history of Armagnac-making, and collects together various bits and bobs of Armagnac-related ephemera including vintage bottles, agricultural tools and a huge 18-ton press dating from the 19th century.

The only thing the museum doesn't offer is the chance to try some of the stuff for yourself. For that, you'll need to head to **Armagnac Ryst-Dupeyron** (36 rue Jean Jaurès; ☀10am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri), one of several Armagnac producers around town offering free sampling. Alternatively, you could try the **Cave Cooperative** (☎05 62 28 1216) on the D931.

Musée du Preservatif

MUSEUM

(Condom Museum; ☎05 62 68 25 69; 2 rue Jules Ferry; adult/child €3/1.50; ☀10am-noon & 3-7pm summer) Condom's seasonal Musée du Preservatif has a small exhibition relating the contraceptive's history from its birth in 1665 to the present day. Some of the exhibits will make you very, very thankful for the invention of latex.

River Trips

CRUISES

From April to October, **Gascogne Navigation** (☎05 62 28 46 46; www.gascogne-navigation.com; La Capitainerie, 3 av d'Aquitaine) runs 1½-hour river cruises (adult/child €8/6) and 2½-hour lunch cruises (€33/19) along the Baise River, departing from quai Bouquerie. They also rent small motorboats (hour/half day/full day €30/65/150) for up to six people.

Sleeping

Le Logis des Cordeliers

HOTEL €€

(☎05 62 28 03 68; www.logisdscordeliers.com; rue de la Paix; d €53-75; ☀Feb-Dec; 📶🚰) The modern shoebox building isn't much to look at, but this family-run hotel makes a great Condom base, set back from the main town in its own private gardens with a lovely pool. Rooms at the back are cheaper and overlook a street.

Hôtel Continental

HÔTEL €€

(☎05 62 68 37 00; www.lecontinental.net; 20 rue Maréchal Foch; d €43-68; 📶) Efficient waterfront hotel near the quay, with clean, spick-and-span rooms and an excellent in-house restaurant. Ask for a room overlooking the garden, as the road out front is very busy.

Le Relais de la Ténarèze

HOTEL €€

(☎05 62 28 02 54; 22 av d'Aquitaine; d/tr €51/74) This welcoming *étape pèlerin* (pilgrim stop) run by pinny-clad Madame for the past 15 years gets packed with groups of Spain-bound cyclists and walkers of Chemin de St-Jacques. For hearty home cooking, invest in the evening *menu du terroir*

(€19) of gigantic dimensions. From April to October reservations are essential.

Les Trois Lys

HOTEL €€€

(☎05 62 28 33 33; www.lestroislys.com; 38 rue Gambetta; d €130-170; 田田田) It's by far the most expensive place to stay in town, but if it's heritage, antiques and aristocratic cachet that float your boat, this is definitely the choice. The 10 rooms are set around an amber-stoned 18th-century mansion, and some look over the sweet interior courtyard.

Camping Caravaning Municipal de l'Argenté

CAMPGROUND €

(☎05 62 28 17 32; campingmunicipal@condom.org; chemin de l'Argenté; tent/adult/under 7yr €4/2/1.50; ☎Apr-Sep, reception 1.30-8pm) Condom's town campsite is about 2.5km south-west of town along the D931. The facilities are fairly basic, but it's a pleasant place to pitch your tent, right on the banks of the river with kayak and canoe hire in summer.



Eating

There are a few cheap-and-cheerful restaurants dotted round Condom, but for proper food you're better off going *demi-pension* at Hôtel Continental or the Relais de la Tenarèze, or splashing out at the town's Michelin-starred wonder.

La Table des Cordeliers

RESTAURANT €€€

(☎05 62 68 43 82; www.latabledescordeliers.fr; 1 rue des Cordeliers; menus €25-67; ☎Tue-Sat) Michelin-starred and mightily impressive. Condom's stunning *table gastronomique* is ensconced beneath the vaulted arches of a former chapel. Head man Eric Sampietro is one of the region's big culinary names, and his menu is well stocked with complex Gascon goodies. Top billing goes to the 'Tout Canard' (all duck) starter menu followed by the 'Assiette des Cordeliers', incorporating duck steak, duck liver and a duck pie.

Librairie Gourmande

CAFÉ €

(3 place Bossuet; plat du jour €7; ☎10am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Browse for books while tucking into crumbly fruitcake and afternoon tea at this delightful little café, on a quiet square near the cathedral.

Self-catering

The weekly *Marché au Gras* held Wednesday and Saturday morning in the **covered market** (place Sapien Duplex) is more experience than shopping trip.

Churchill's: The British Grocer in Gers (place Sapien Duplex; ☎10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat) is the place for homesick Brits, with shelves full of Marmite, English teabags and Kellogg's cereal.



Information

Tourist office (☎05 62 28 00 80; www.tourisme-tenarèze.com; 50 bd de la Libération; ☎9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) The tourist office occupies new premises on the outskirts of town following a fire.



Getting There & Around

Condom's pretty poorly served on the public-transport front. About the only option are the three daily **buses** to/from Auch (€7, 50 minutes). Depending on the season, there's usually one bus which runs on to Toulouse (€17, 2½ hours), and another to Bordeaux (€20.50, 2¾ hours, Monday to Saturday).

Around Condom

This corner of the ancient province of Gascon was in its time wild frontier country, caught between the French, entrenched in Toulouse, and the English with their power base in Bordeaux. The better endowed of the hapless villages caught in the crossfire between opposing forces fortified themselves against attack, creating the distinctive *bastide* towns that now litter the area.

There are several within easy reach of Condom, all of which can be covered in a leisurely morning's drive or, better still, a gorgeous day's bike ride.



Sights

Fourcès

BASTIDE

Some 13km northwest of Condom, Fourcès (the 's' is pronounced) is a picturesque *bastide* on the River Auzoue, worth a visit for its unusual shape – unlike most *bastides*, it's circular rather than square-shaped. The village bursts into colour during the last weekend of April as thousands pour in for its **Marché aux Fleurs**, more a flower festival than a market.

Cité des Machines du Moyen Âge

MUSEUM

(www.larressingle.free.fr; adult/child €8/5; ☎10am-7pm) Sometimes known locally as 'little Carcassonne', the textbook bastion of **Larressingle**, 5km west of Condom, must be France's cutest fortified village. Just outside town, this outdoor museum (closed in winter) collects together an assortment of

replica trebuchets, catapults and siege machines arranged as if they're about to assault the town. You can see several of the machines in action, and kids can clamber around a miniature fort.

Villa Gallo-Romaine

ROMAN VILLA

(☎05 62 29 48 57; adult/child €4/free; ☼10am-7pm, closed winter) About 1.5km southwest of the *bastide* town of **Montréal du Gers** are the excavated remains of a luxurious 4th-century Gallo-Roman villa, once part of the agricultural estate of a Roman aristocrat. Archaeologists so far have revealed the villa's baths, outbuildings and huge areas of spectacular mosaic floors, still boasting dazzlingly bright colours despite centuries of being buried underground.

Admission includes entry to the small museum within Montréal's **tourist office** (☎05 62 29 42 85; place Hôtel de Ville; ☼9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat) displaying artefacts from Séviac.

Abbaye de Flaran

ABBEY

(☎05 62 28 50 19; <http://www.sources.fr/abbayeflaran.html>; Valence sur Baise; adult/student €4/2; ☼9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, closed 2 weeks Jan) Founded in 1151 by Pyrenees monks from Escaladieu, and guarded by a 14th-century fortress door turned pigeon loft, this abbey is the loveliest in southwest France. Built in a remote green spot, it was occupied until the French Revolution, by which point no more than a handful of monks remained. Its vaulted chapter hall propped up by coloured marble columns, refectory with 15th-century triple arch window and decorative moulding (spot the phoenix and pelican), and renovated monks' cells, are particularly fine. Watch for art exhibitions and classical-music concerts in its grounds.

Collegiale St-Pierre

CHURCH

(adult/child €4.80/free; ☼9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun) Towering over the little village of **La Romieu**, 11km northeast of Condom, this enormous 14th-century collegiale is famous for its twin 33m towers and a fine Gothic cloister. Left of the altar is the sacristy where original medieval frescos include arcane biblical characters, black angels and esoteric symbols. Climb the 136 steps of the double-helix stairway to the top of the octagonal tower for a memorable countryside panorama.

Tickets and access are via the helpful **tourist office** (☎05 62 28 86 33; www.la-romieu.com).

Les Jardins de Coursiana

GARDENS

(☎05 62 68 22 80; www.jardinsdecoursiana.com, in French; adult/child €6.50/4; ☼10am-8pm Mon-Sat mid-Apr-Oct) Also in La Romieu, these landscaped gardens are the handiwork of a local agricultural engineer. Over 700 trees and rare plants, each clearly labelled, flourish in the arboretum English garden, aromatic herb garden and *potager familial* (family vegetable patch). A ticket covering the church and gardens costs €9.30.

Musée Archéologique

ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM

(☎05 62 68 70 22; place du Général de Gaulle; adult/child €4/free; ☼10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Sep, Wed-Mon Oct-Feb) Lectoure's archaeology museum displays various finds from local Gallo-Roman sites (including 20 bull- or ram-head pagan altars, used for sacrifice), Roman jewellery and mosaics.

Sleeping & Eating

La Lumiane

B&B €

(☎05 62 28 95 95; www.lalumiane.com; grande rue, St-Puy; s €42-52, d €51-61; ☼☼) Halfway between Condom and Auch in the gorgeous little village of St-Puy, this is quite simply one of our favourite *chambres d'hôte* in southwest France. It's delightfully simple and heart-warmingly homely, lodged inside a lemon-stoned house graced with china-blue shutters and a sweet garden and enormous tree-fringed pool. Inside, a magnificent stone staircase leads up to two spacious suites, each with their own fireplace and rustic overhead beams, or three cosy rooms on the top floor. Downstairs, owners Alain and Gisele serve up super regional food in the stone-walled kitchen. You really won't ever want to leave.

Château de Pomiro

B&B €

(☎05 62 69 57 99; www.chateaupomiro.com; Montréal du Gers; d €150; ☼☼) You'll really feel like the king of the castle at this turreted mansion near Montréal. Once a hunting lodge belonging to the Marquis and Marquise de Noë, the château now offers some wonderful period bedrooms, full of intriguing antiques and features: the Grande Chambre even has its own huge open fireplace. Meals available (four-course meal €40).

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